**Review: Paul van Ostaijen *Occupied City*, translated by David Colmer, typography by Katy Mawhood, Smokestack Press, 2016.**

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Antwerp that night was like several different kinds of hell. The broken houses and dead horses lit up by an infernal glare. Once we passed by a shelled station where the locomotives and signals had been taken up and twisted + rolled up in the railway lines as if by a child. The lowlands by the Scheldt were one sea of blazing oil, the flames leaping up higher than a Cathedral, + above everything a black pall. Under that we marched along, English & Belgians & transport + refugees. The refugees were the worst sight.

Rupert Brooke, letter 25 December 1914.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Among the first to volunteer for service in 1914, the English poet Rupert Brooke was sent out with the Royal Naval Division to reinforce the strategically important port city of Antwerp, which had been under German heavy bombardment since late August 1914. The Division arrived at Antwerp on October 3, but by October 8, the English and Belgian troops were forced to retreat, and Antwerp became a German occupied city. Brooke’s private letter details the twisted carnage of urban civilisation under war, seen during his thirty mile march out of Antwerp.

The poet Paul van Ostaijen, a few years younger than Brooke, was exposed to the ‘several different kinds of hell’ even more acutely: Antwerp was his home city. His remarkable montage poem *Occupied City* (1921) is based on quotidian life in the city during the siege – starting with Zeppelin bombings on 25 August 1914 – the retreat and subsequent occupation of Antwerp until Armistice Day 1918. A rhythmic typographic poem, *Occupied City* draws on the techniques of modern advertising, cinematography, and a layering of languages to render the topographies of the war-torn urban environment: the desolate port with English signage of goods and commercial shipping routes, ‘still lifes of broken signs’ rattling in the wind, the abandoned forts with corpses and ‘trampled barbed wire’, the music hall, lyrics from French songs drifting out, the bars, the German curfewed streets, but also the Flemish domestic home, where the family anxiously awaits the letter from ‘my brother’ at the Front. The rhythmic typography of the poem was designed by Oscar Jespers, who also handcut special letters and abstract woodcut illustrations for the book-length work.

Paul van Ostaijen has long been recognised as a major European avant-garde poet within Anglo-American literary culture. The leading publisher of innovative modernist poetry, New Directions, issued the English translation of *Feasts of Fear and Agony* in 1976, while Sun and Moon Press, the main press for the Language poets, published the translations of Paul van Ostaijen’s selected poems, *The First Book of Schmoll* in 1982. Although the title *Occupied City* was widely discussed in the introductions to both these van Ostaijen editions, with French and German translations of *Bezette Stad* appearing in the early 1990s, an actual English edition of the poem remained outstanding. *Occupied City,* in a translation by David Colmer and with typography by Katy Mawhood, was published in October 2016 by a British publisher, Smokestack Press.

In Anglophone cultural memory, Flanders itself is a poetic trope of the Great War: a field of elegiac poppies, colonised by the English fallen. The metonymy already occurs Ford Madox Ford’s 1915 poem “October 1914 (Antwerp)”: ‘These are the women of Flanders./ They await the lost./ They await the lost that shall never leave the dock;/They await the lost that shall never again come by the train.’ The ‘women of Flanders’, within the poem, are also English mothers waiting hopelessly for the return of their soldier sons at Charing Cross Station, where Flanders, to cite Rupert Brooke’s 1914 sonnet ‘The Soldier’, is ‘some corner of a foreign field that is forever England’. In Britain, where official war commemoration turns to war poets for their lyrical national humanism, Paul van Ostaijen’s *Occupied City* – with its fierce satire of the hegemonic ‘Religion, Sovereign and State’ (fig 1) as well as its Dadaist-inspired poetics – may well make for difficult reading. Within this British context, it is certainly notable that Smokestack Press has as its remit ‘to champion poets who are unfashionable, radical, left-field and working a long way from the metropolitan centres of cultural authority’.

Yet *Bezette Stad* had been long recognised by a ‘metropolitan centre of cultural authority’. The National Art Library at the V&A Museum holds an original edition of *Bezette Stad* in their avant-garde book art collection. The V&A hosted a practice-based research colloquium on the work in 2006, in which the Paul van Ostaijen scholar Geert Buelens facilitated a collaborative draft translation of the entire *Bezette Stad* by British poets, academics and curators.[[2]](#endnote-2) They observed how the rhythmic typography coheres the complicated semantic historical fields in the poem. As print work, *Bezette Stad* – ‘the composited city’ – may be resonant of the work of the radical urban poet and artisan printer, William Blake, or even of William Caxton. Thus, an integral adaptation of the printed text – the translation and typography – was considered necessary for any English publication of *Occupied City.* The German publisher did not attempt this: it presented *Besetzte Stadt* as a facsimile of the original, with the translation as plain liner notes on the facing page.*[[3]](#endnote-3)* A potential English publication of *Occupied City*, then, was envisaged as a translator/typographer collaboration, along the lines of Neil Crawford and Ian Tyson’s 1985 Tetrad Press edition of Mallarmé’s *A Throw of the Dice*.[[4]](#endnote-4) However, such book art presses issue very limited print runs: they are intended for collectors or major research libraries, rather than wider dissemination. *Occupied City*, then, seemed destined to remain a reputed avant-garde work, one that is only circulated by word of mouth.

Extraordinarily, Smokestack Press published *Occupied City* as an affordable pocket book. The typographer Katy Mawhood worked with translator David Colmer in adapting the composition, using standard contemporary letter fonts with the format scaled down to a quarter of the original edition. The collaboration makes for a fluent adaptation. The additional challenge for the translator is the many contemporaneous references – which appear not just in Flemish, but also French and German – in *Bezette Stad.* These are superbly researched and translated. Take this brief, allegorical poem for example:

**De Obus over de Stad**

steeds elegant

Mijnheer Obus

zeer snel auto

groet iedereen

stapt af bedaard

in zijn hotel

**The Crump over the City**

always elegant

Mr Crump Esq.

very fast car

greeting everyone

alighting calmly

at his hotel

The English ‘crump’ is an inspired choice: like the Flemish ‘obus’, it is First World War slang for a heavy artillery shell, and as a proper noun, also an existing surname. It perfectly renders the defamiliarisation effect of the original: the gap between seeing the ‘Mr Crump’ and understanding what it is, what Ian Watts would call delayed decoding. Paul van Ostaijen uses the simple present tense, as would a screenwriter, to mediate the aerial shelling as a montage sequence. (The shell comes into view. It whistles through the air. Approaches its target. Hits the building.) The poet indicates the pacing of the segments through Mr Crump’s actions (‘zeer snel’/’bedaard’) and cuts the prepositional phrase against the syntax (‘stapt af’ /’in zijn hotel’). The English translation, however, does not mediate the historical present through the montage technique, but rather opts for present participles, making for a pervasive, continuous presence of Mr Crump. The translator establishes continuity on the basis of syntax, rather than montage. The prepositional phrase is ‘corrected’ so the allegorical image flows syntactically, yet the translation, as such, is also a simulacrum, a distorted copy. The crump, in the translation, misses its target: landing ‘at’ a building. The impending trajectory Paul van Ostaijen registers of the shell is ‘into’ a building – Rupert Brooke: ‘a shelled station’ ‘taken up and twisted + rolled up’ – as what is targeted, after all, is the built-up city.

In a later typographic poem in *Occupied City* (fig 2) a huge Zeppelin is placed above an eye-like smaller circle, with the word ‘Square’ in the centre, and around it ‘Goodbye Piccadilly, Farewell Leicester’. This is, of course, an allusion to the contemporaneous English music-hall song popular among soldiers, but also to actual locations in the theatre district in London. The poem’s typography maps the location of the Zeppelin aerial bombings on London, known as the ‘Theatreland Raid’, on 13/14 October 1915. The crump struck the Lyceum Theatre during an interval in the performance, killing 17 people. Paul van Ostaijen mediates this as reported news – ‘dagbladen’ –within the historical present of the poem. Here, the adaptation follows the original: only the word ‘dagbladen’ requires translation. But of course, it is because the contemporaneous Flemish is so resonantly and precisely translated throughout the work, that the reader is readily able to interpret the Zeppelin poem within the historical context of *Occupied City*. The publisher, translator and typographer should be thanked for affording readers such a creative, meticulous and accessible publication of *Occupied City.*

1. Letter. Rupert Brooke to Russell Loines, 25 December 1914. King’s College, Cambridge. *The Papers of Rupert Chawner Brooke*. RCB/L/8/26/4 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Research Colloquium *Occupied City* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, 4 March 2006. The poets, academics and curators who participated: Geert Buelens, Elizabeth James, Simon Smith, Andrew Duncan, Gavin Selerie, Harry Gilonis, Shelby Matthews, Sean Bonney, Rob Holloway, Jeff Hilson, Frances Presley, Peter Manson, Tim Atkins, Karlien van den Beukel. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Besetzte Stadt* (1991) München: Edition Text + Kritik. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Neil Crawford (1997) ‘Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de Dés, Collected Papers on the Book Arts.* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)